

Submission to consultation on election posters

Submitted to the Electoral Commission

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National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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Summary of recommendations

In this submission, we make the following recommendations:

- Election posters should **not** be banned or significantly restricted, because they are an important source of information for adults with literacy needs.
- Election posters and other political communications should be:
 - accessible;
 - reliable; and
 - in plain language.

Introduction

We are the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), a registered charity and membership-based organisation. We receive annual funding from SOLAS to support the Further Education and Training strategy (SOLAS 2020) and the Adult Literacy for Life strategy (SOLAS 2021).

We believe that literacy is a human right. Everyone in Ireland should have the chance to develop their literacy, numeracy and digital skills to take part fully in society. Our mission is to:

- campaign for literacy as human right;
- be leaders and champion best literacy practice; and
- support organisations in their efforts to be literacy friendly.

NALA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the public consultation by the Electoral Commission on election posters.

Literacy, numeracy and digital skills

Literacy, numeracy and digital skills involve listening, speaking, reading, writing, using numbers and everyday technology to communicate, to build relationships, to understand information and to make informed choices in all areas of everyday life.

Literacy, numeracy and digital skills enable people to reach their full potential, to be active and critical participants in society and to help address poverty and social exclusion.



In this document, we use the word “literacy” to refer to all of these skills.

Literacy and equality

Literacy needs arise because of educational and wider structural inequalities. A person with literacy needs is more likely to have:

- parents with low educational attainment;
- poor health; and
- low income.

They are also more likely to be unemployed or outside the labour force (Central Statistics Office, CSO, 2024).

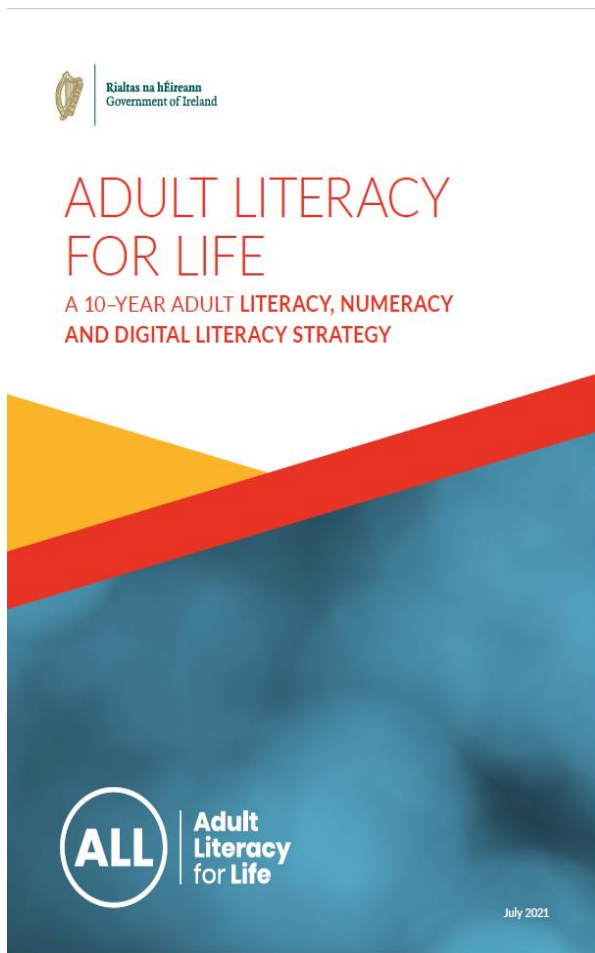
For equality, priority should be given to those who have experienced the most educational disadvantage – the **furthest behind first** principle in the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015). For the furthest behind, there must be enhanced and targeted opportunities and supports.



Adult Literacy for Life strategy

The Government published a **10-year Adult Literacy for Life strategy** in 2021. It aims to: “ensure that everyone has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to fully participate in society and realise their potential” (SOLAS 2021, p4).

This strategy commits to a cross-Government, cross-economy and cross-society approach to support literacy needs. It means that a whole range of sectors will understand literacy barriers and work together to remove them. This includes the Electoral Commission and other state bodies.



www.adultliteracyforlife.ie

Adult literacy needs in Ireland today

Findings from the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Survey of Adult Skills 2023, released on 10 December 2024 (CSO 2024), show the following:

- **1 in 5** adults in Ireland (21%, around 700,000 people) do not have basic proficiency in **literacy**. This means that 1 in 5 adults can, **at best**, understand short texts and organised lists, when information is clearly indicated.

For example, these people would most likely find it difficult to read a political party's manifesto.

- **1 in 4** adults¹ in Ireland (25%, around 835,000 people) do not have basic proficiency in **numeracy**². This means that 1 in 4 adults can, **at best**, do basic calculations but may struggle with tasks needing multiple steps.

For example, the **Irish Times coverage of the survey results** (O'Brien, 10 December 2024) highlighted that numeracy can affect understanding of numbers used in politics.

Other findings on digital skills in 2023, from the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI, European Commission 2024), show that

- **More than 1 in 4** adults³ in Ireland (27%, just over a million people) do not have basic **digital** skills. This means that more than 1 in 4 adults have not done at least one activity in each of five digital competence areas⁴. Activities include sending an email, fact-checking, or changing software settings.

Finding candidate information online may be a challenge for this group.

¹ Aged 16-65

² This means they score at or below Level 1 on a five-level scale

³ Aged 16-74

⁴ Information and data literacy; Communication and collaboration; Digital content creation; Problem-solving; and Safety skills

Literacy friendly organisations

Given the extent of literacy needs in Ireland, it is important for organisations to be aware of literacy needs and to be literacy friendly. This means that the organisation makes it as easy as possible for staff and service users to get the information they need, to use their services and to participate fully.

The resources on this page can help the Electoral Commission to be more literacy friendly.

Communications

- NALA's **plain English resources** including our **Writing and Design Tips** (NALA 2024)
- NALA's **plain English editing and training services**
- the **Customer Communications Toolkit for Services to the Public** designed by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) and the National Disability Authority (NDA) (2023)

Literacy awareness

- NALA's range of **Literacy Awareness Training** options, including webinars and professional development courses
- NALA's practical guide to being a literacy friendly organisation, **Making it Happen** (NALA 2023)
- the short online course from the Adult Literacy for Life National Programme Office, "**Let's Talk About Literacy**"

Literacy and political engagement

The OECD Survey of Adult Skills 2023 found that in most countries, people with low levels of literacy and numeracy are less likely to believe in their ability to affect government decisions. The OECD calls this belief “political efficacy”⁵ (OECD 2024a)

In Ireland, for example, 25% of adults with high proficiency in numeracy⁶ have high political efficacy, but just 15% of adults with low proficiency in numeracy⁷ have high political efficacy (see Figure 1).

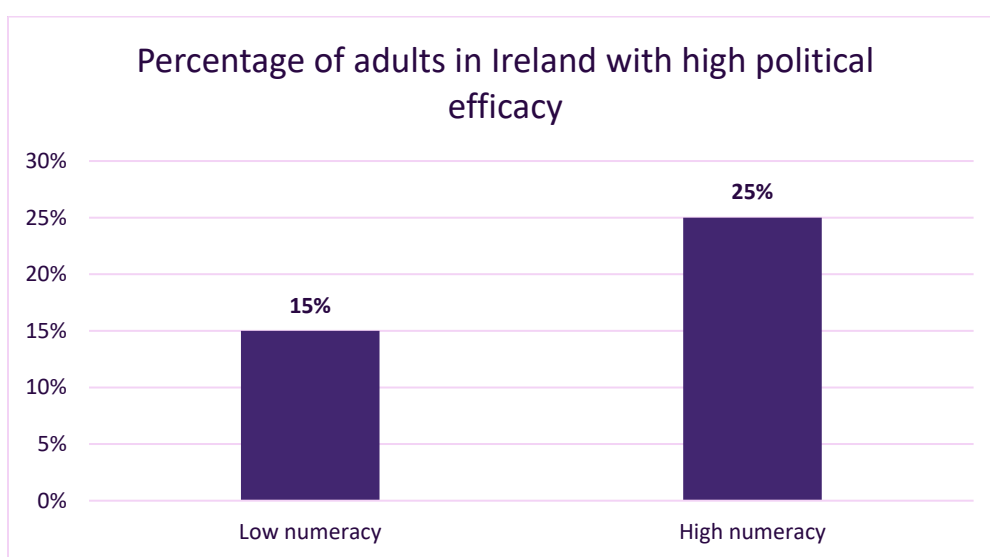


Figure 1: Percentage of Adults in Ireland with High Political Efficacy, by Numeracy Level.
Source: OECD 2024a

The OECD highlights in their analysis how low political efficacy relates to disconnection, and lack of digital literacy:

“Many low-skilled adults feel disconnected from political processes and lack the skills to engage with complex digital information, which is a growing concern for modern democracies.”

(OECD 2024b, p24)

⁵ “High political efficacy” means that the person gave a value of 7 or higher on a 10-point scale in response to the question, “How much would you say the political system in Ireland allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?”

⁶ Level 4 and above on a 5-point scale

⁷ Level 1 and below on a 5-point scale

The lower political engagement of people with literacy needs can be addressed by literacy education, but also by making political systems easier for people with literacy needs to engage in. This includes political communications such as posters.

Response to consultation questions

The **Electoral Postering Consultation Paper** asks the following questions.

1. Do you see positive aspects/advantages to election posters? If yes, please explain.
2. Do you see negative aspects/disadvantages to election posters? If yes, please explain.
3. Do you think Ireland's rules and approach to election posters should change? If yes, please explain the changes you'd like to see and the reasons for this.
4. Is there anything else you would like to say about the use of election posters in Ireland?

We will answer these questions in turn in this document, and we will also submit the same text through the online form at www.electoralcommission.ie/consultation.

We make our comments and recommendations based on what we know from research evidence and our 45 years as literacy experts. Our responses should be considered in the context of the guiding principles and evidence outlined above. We have also consulted with our student subcommittee specifically for this submission. NALA's student subcommittee is a group of adult literacy learners and former adult literacy learners which reports into our Board. Their views are included below – direct quotes are from WhatsApp messages.

1. Positive aspects of election posters

Election posters are important for people with literacy needs. Members of our student subcommittee reported that election posters help them to find out about elections, and who is running in their area. Some members find posters very helpful, others find them quite helpful, but none said that they aren't helpful at all.

A key benefit of election posters is that they help people with literacy needs to recognise candidates:

“Election posters are good if you can put a face to the posters then a person with dyslexia can vote because they can see the person behind the election.”

Member of NALA's student subcommittee (1)

This is particularly helpful when people with literacy needs go to vote. They can recognise the face they see from election posters on the ballot paper. It was an adult with literacy needs, Ernie Sweeney, who advocated for the inclusion of pictures on the ballot paper (see this [video from the Irish Independent](#)).

The simple benefit of recognition should not be underestimated given 1 in 5 adults in Ireland have literacy needs, and adults with literacy needs are typically less politically engaged, with implications for democracy and social cohesion.

In Scotland, for example, where election posters have been banned a drop in voter turnout has been observed ([Geoghegan 2015](#)). It is reasonable to infer that a ban on election posters would disproportionately affect people with literacy needs.

2. Negative aspects of election posters

Election posters are not always easy for people with literacy needs to understand. Members of our student subcommittee made the following suggestions for how election posters could provide more information:

“Independent candidates need a key word message on their posters.
Political party candidates will follow party policies.”

Member of NALA’s student subcommittee (2)

“Maybe a qr code on the posters, if you are interested in her or him you can check them out by the qr code on the posters [...]”

Member of NALA’s student subcommittee (3)

These suggestions speak to the limitations of how much information a poster can get across. Most posters rely on the assumption that people who see the poster will have contextual information about the candidate, or a way to access more information themselves. But adults with literacy needs are less likely to have access to political information.

Another member of our student subcommittee spoke about how meeting candidates in person when they go door-to-door is very valuable to them. This is an opportunity to get information about the candidate that they would find difficult to search for and read about online. They suggested that posters could indicate that a candidate is available to meet, or has an office that voters can visit.

Members of our student subcommittee also expressed concerns as citizens, unrelated to literacy. For example, they made these suggestions to make posters more accessible, and to reduce the number of posters that go up:

“if they [put] posters down to the height of placing your hand [on] them to feel [Braille] on them [...]” (3)

Member of NALA’s student subcommittee (3)

“One small little problem minister’s should not put up any more than 5 or 6 posters round the town.”

Member of NALA’s student subcommittee (1)

What this feedback tells us is that having lots of posters of the same candidate doesn’t help adults with literacy needs to understand what the candidate stands for. What matters is how much the poster design tells them about the candidate, and how easy it is to access further information about the candidate, once they have seen the poster.

3. Our view on whether Ireland's rules on election posters should change

Based on the feedback from our student subcommittee, we recommend that the use of election posters should **not** be banned or significantly restricted in Ireland.

Election posters are an important political communication tool for adults with literacy needs, who make up 1 in 5 of the population in Ireland. In particular, election posters help adults with literacy needs to recognise candidates. This is an essential step in the voting process, without which these voters (who are often from marginalised communities) would be excluded.

The approach should be to make election posters more useful, meaningful and accessible, for people with literacy needs and other groups who are politically marginalised. Specifically, we would like to see the following rules or conventions in place:

- Posters to use plain language only.
- Party affiliations and or key policy positions to be obvious on every poster.
- Posters to be more visually accessible, for example in terms of colour contrast and size of text.
- Significant sanctions for posters that are factually inaccurate or misleading.

In Australia, candidates must certify that their campaign complies with certain communication principles (see Certification Statement section at the bottom of the **Australian Electoral Commission's Campaign Hub**). Ireland could follow this example. We recommend using the Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service (DPER and NDA 2023) as a basis for any regulations.

We would not object to measures that put a reasonable limit on the number of posters any one candidate, party or group can put up in a certain area, so long as the election and the various posters are still highly visible to members of the public, no matter where they live.

4. Further comments

It is clear from our consultation with NALA's student subcommittee that election posters are an important source of information for adults with literacy needs, but they need more information than can be contained in one poster. Any guidance or regulations around election posters should therefore be supplemented by guidance or regulations around other methods of political communication. We have two key recommendations about political communications more generally.

1. Written information should be in plain language. Party manifestos, candidate information booklets and flyers can be overly complicated and inaccessible, despite the natural incentive for candidates to reach as many people as possible.

"A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information"

International Plain Language Federation

2. Audiovisual media such as radio, TV, podcasts and social media are particularly important for adults with literacy needs. At the moment, radio and TV are better regulated than online media, but online sources are becoming more popular. Online media must be regulated to ensure that adults with literacy needs have reliable sources of political information.

Contact

We are happy to discuss our comments and recommendations further.

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List of acronyms

| | |
|------|--|
| CSO | Central Statistics Office |
| DESI | Digital Economy and Society Index |
| DPER | Department of Public Expenditure and Reform |
| NALA | National Adult Literacy Agency |
| NDA | National Disability Authority |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| UN | United Nations |

References

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European Commission (2024). **Ireland 2024 Digital Decade Country Report.**

NALA (2023). **Making it Happen: Five Steps to Becoming a Literacy Friendly Organisation.**

NALA (2024). **Writing and Design Tips: How to Write and Design your Documents and Materials so they are Easier to Read, Understand and Use.**

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United Nations (UN) (2015). **Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.**

About NALA

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is a charity and membership based organisation. We support adults with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs to access learning opportunities that meet their needs and to take part fully in society. NALA does this by raising awareness of the importance of literacy, doing research and sharing good practice. We also provide support through our online learning courses, tutoring service and by lobbying for further investment to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.

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